

Finding Secret Fishing Spots

FINDING SECRET FISHING SPOTS

47 tips, tactics and tools you can use to find your own secret spot and catch more fish.

IT'S UP TO YOU

#1 Don't expect other anglers to point the way. You are pretty much on your own when it comes to finding secret spots.

This may come as a shock—but some fishermen have been known to lie. If they tell you about a secret spot, they may be trying to throw you off track. Or, what you hear may simply be misinformation that's repeated from angler to angler. Water and conditions change over the years. Very few anglers will give you details about their own favorite secret spot. The fishing stores in general will probably point you toward the places where most anglers go—spots easy to find from a car window.

GET AWAY FROM OTHER ANGLERS

#2 The key to finding secret spots is staying away from the places most anglers go. Overall, this means seeking the smaller waters. This means usually but not always finding remote waters. Most of the time you will need to do some walking or will have some difficulty accessing the water in some way.

Everyone's done this at some point in his or her fishing career. You're driving near a stream anxious to get your line in the water when you spot several other anglers fishing and think, "They must know something, that this must be a good spot." Or, maybe there are no other anglers, but you notice the telltale signs of crowds—fishhooks in trees, old bait containers and streamside trails so trampled they feel like sidewalks underfoot.

Then you see nice-sized fish. And they are really close. You cast and practically hit a big one with your bait. But instead of striking, it appears to yawn and doesn't budge. A sure sign of overfished water. Whenever fish see 100's of anglers in one day, they're almost permanently spooked.

In total contrast, consider the stories about fishing in the remotest places on earth such as Alaska, Labrador, and Siberia. Fish rarely see humans or artificial lures and flies—and anglers lucky enough to travel to these areas report hooking up with and releasing over 100 huge fish in one day. You won't find untouched areas with these tips—but you can find remote and hard to reach spots where fish are easier to hook because they see fewer anglers.

SCOUTING FOR POTENTIAL SECRET SPOTS

#3 Watersheds. One approach is to look at watersheds first. Your Professor Higbee's Stream and Lake Map shows watershed boundaries in green. If you are not familiar with watersheds, think of them as large water basins. The tops of the hills or mountains form the boundary lines, all the water within a boundary ends up in the same place. A watershed containing waters known to be fishable may also contain conditions that support prime overlooked "secret fishing spots."

#4 Lesser known streams and lakes. Famous streams and lakes mean more anglers. To get away from the crowd try the lesser-known streams that feed into the larger famous streams. Or maybe a tributary that feeds

a tributary. With lakes, look for those in between bigger lakes.

#5 Lesser known national and state parks. Again, avoid the "household word" parks. There are fantastic public lands out there that haven't received a lot of attention. Large areas of public land usually have remote fishing spots.

#6 No names. A stream or lake without a name could mean that it doesn't exist in the minds of most anglers. Some will only fish waters that are mentioned in books and magazine articles.

#7 Streams above and below a popular lake. When you see crowds at a lake take a closer look at the streams feeding it and draining it. The best part, you probably won't see many anglers on the stream.

#8 Fish migrate and move from one body of water to another. Just because a body of water is not stocked doesn't mean it has no fish. If a lake, larger stream or river is known to contain fish the connecting lakes and streams very likely contain fish—although these waters could be seasonal.

#9 Check the whole stretch. Just because the part of the stream nearest to the road contains few fish, does not necessarily mean this is the case further up stream and away from roads. But, most anglers would assume the whole stream contains few fish. A little scouting could locate a secret spot.

REMOTE SPOTS

#10 If it's hard to get to, there may be a good chance it's not fished much. Most of us are in the habit of finding the easiest way to do things. Hard-to-find is a good thing. And small is good. In remote areas you will usually be dealing with small streams and lakes and usually but not always smaller fish. But, remote spots have other things to offer—especially if you enjoy the great outdoors.

OVERLOOKED SPOTS

Overlooked spots are not necessarily remote spots, but instead are just not obvious. They could even be close to populated areas, not obvious because they are right under our noses. For example, there's great smallmouth bass fishing right in front of the governor's mansion in Pennsylvania.

#11 Tailwaters are the stretches of water below dams. They contain some of the best trophy fish in the United States. The growth rates of fish can be phenomenal because of the rich aquatic systems provided by the upstream dam.

#12 Water close to cities and major Interstate highways. People simply assume such places don't hold any fish. A guy at a fishing show told me that he knew of a stream close to a major metro area that held big trout.

#13 Underfished areas of popular water. Even heavily-fished streams have sections which are underfished by most anglers. Anglers tend to go where there are other anglers—the herd instinct.

#14 Don't let the view from the car window fool you. If it looks impossible to access from your vehicle, other anglers have the same impression. Do some exploring on foot, and you will usually find a way to access the water.

READING SMALL STREAMS AND LAKES

The best places on a small stream or small lake are not necessarily the same as it is on big water. Again, fish in the places on the water that most anglers miss, overlook or avoid.

I once helped a biologist shock a small private stream. This didn't harm the fish; it merely stunned them for a short time. We netted and placed them in a large bucket until they revived, then gently released them back into the stream. We were trying to determine the population and condition of the fish. Holding two electrodes and wearing rubber waders, we moved through the stream and turned the shocker on and off.

It was amazing to see fish seemingly materialize from nowhere. I'd be looking into clear shallow water I wouldn't have bothered fishing, and see no fish. But, turn on the shocker and a half dozen dazed fish would float to the surface. This is something you have to see to believe.

15 The biggest fish are almost always in a good hiding spot. Undercuts, dogleg bends, washed out tree roots make great hiding spots for the larger fish. But, it doesn't take a huge hole to hide a nice sized fish—merely a spot the size of the fish.

#16 Shallow water between the holes and pools. At times this is some of the best water because most anglers pass it by in a hurry to get to the hole they just spotted 10 or 20 yards away. Here stealth is very important.

#17 Find colder water. Colder water means water with more oxygen for the fish. In warmer weather, find spots where a small tributary feeds cool water into a larger river or stream. Sometimes fish will school up in these areas. They are easy to spot on your Professor Higbee's Stream and Lake Map.

#18 Reading fishermen's streamside trails. This is the small path created by other anglers. You can see where the majority has passed by certain areas. Very thick areas, steep, rocky, difficult to reach spots. This is proof of a spot that very few bother to fish. Your willingness to make a little more effort to reach these spots than the next guy could result in catching more fish.

#19 No fishermen's trail visible. If you don't see any signs of a trail—check it out—you may have found a secret spot.

#20 Transition spots. Where the cold aerated water coming out of the forest meets meadows and open land. You will sometimes see this effect on larger lakes—where a temperature line harbors more fish.

#21 Beaver Ponds. Beaver ponds can hold big fish even if the impounded stream is tiny. Even if a tiny stream rushes down a mountain—a beaver pond makes the water deep enough to hold some really nice fish.

READING MAPS

Maps provide clues. Your Professor Higbee's Stream and Lake Map is great for broad searching, locating watershed boundaries and trip planning. The laminated map allows you to mark prospective areas with a dry erase pen. But, to get close in and look at trails and back roads, you will need topographical maps like the DeLorme Atlas series. Or the 7.5 topographical maps from USGS.

#22 Look for the point where the trail or road leaves the water. Sometimes a short hike will take you to an area that

seldom sees another angler—a prime candidate for your very own secret spot.

#23 Look for waterfalls. They have pools below that could hold big fish.

#24 Look for the contour lines to widen above a steep rapidly descending stream. Such widening indicates a flat meadow area that could contain nice holes. But, because of the steep area, many anglers avoid the water.

#25 Look for spike trails that leave the more popular loop trails.

SMALL STREAM AND LAKE TACTICS

#26 Casting. Difficult to cast to can mean that others will pass a prime spot and move on to the next easier hole. Accept the challenge and find a way to approach it and cast to it. Learn casting methods that work in tight spots. Methods are described in greater detail in the "how to" books.

#27 Think like a hunter. On small streams, fishing is closer to hunting. Stealth, silence and keeping out of view of the fish is very important. On small water you are much more visible—you appear as a towering giant compared to a larger river or big stream. Learn to crouch and stay in the shadows. Wear dark natural colors.

#28 Slow down—we are all in a big hurry. Rushing around is a habit for most of us. Fish can easily spot sudden movements. The crane is able to pierce a trout as it stands in the water because it moves at the speed of the hands on a clock.

#29 Observe first. Simply take the time to observe what's going on. From a spot with cover, sit and relax, back away from the stream. Look for rises—notice where on the stream they are—this could be a pattern for the rest of the stream or lake.

#30 Shadows. Be aware of where you are casting your shadow or the shadow your rod casts—it will spook fish. Again, with smaller water you appear much bigger to the fish.

#31 Be a bushwhacker if necessary. Thick overgrown areas sometimes hide water that is thick with fish.

ACCESS TO REMOTE AREAS

#32 Backpacking. Whether you use a full pack for overnight-extended hikes or a smaller daypack for short or day trips, it's still the best mode when you need to get to remote areas. Trails in remote areas are used primarily by hikers that don't fish—don't assume that anglers are using the trails.

#33 ATV (all terrain vehicles) or 4-wheel vehicles on old logging trails and mountain dirt roads. Don't assume that remote roads and trails are being used by anglers only—it's more likely that people into 4-wheeling are using the roads.

#34 Mountain bike. Check out the Rails-To-Trails network being built on old railroad beds after the tracks have been removed. Many provide access to previously inaccessible areas. Most allow mountain bikes and hiking but not ATV or 4-wheel vehicles. Most people using these trails are simply hiking or biking—not fishing.

#35 Canoe, Kayak or raft. Get into the heart of remote areas by river or large stream then explore the feeder

tributaries and remote lakes.

#36 Horseback. Popular in the western United States. A great way to pack enough equipment and food for an extended trip. Available from some guides and outfitters.

WHEN TO FISH

They say timing is everything. Fish where few anglers fish and also fish at times when few anglers go fishing.

#37 Dusk and dawn. I now understand why my father wanted me to trade a warm bed for a cold boat at 5:00 am. Fish feel safe in low light conditions.

#38 Night fishing. Some really big fish are hooked at night. Joe Humphreys once told us the story of how he caught a state record brown trout at night—and on a small stream (Pennsylvania, 33 inches)! One reason these big old wise fish made it to monster proportions is by only coming out of their hiding places at night. Your secret spot could be water that's marginal during the day but excellent by the dark of night.

#39 Sun and moon positions. Everything on earth is affected by the gravitation of the moon and position of the sun—including fish. Suddenly, for no evident reason, fish will begin to feed actively, taking most anything you offer them. Then, just about as quickly as it had begun, the activity begins to taper off until in a short space of time all nature will be quiet. This effect has been named Solunar by John Alden Knight. It's the study of the effects of the sun and moon on fish and game. The annual editions of Solunar Tables, summarize these periods into tables for one calendar year.

TOOLS

#40 Binoculars. A small portable pair is great for spotting rises in the dark shadows of the far side of the stream. If you see several fish rising, try to spot the largest one to cast to. On many smaller holes you will get one chance only—then all the fish in the hole are spooked.

#41 Scout under the water. If you are into fancy tools, try an underwater video camera. It could be both fun and educational. See just how big that hole or undercut is where the stream makes a hard left or right turn. Is there a lunker lurking back under the rock ledge? Or try a good pair of UV glasses.

#42 Night vision. Binoculars that allow you to see where fish are feeding in virtually no or low light conditions.

#43 Compass. Simple to use, a good thing to have when you go into the woods. Works well with maps.

#44 GPS. A Global Positioning System unit can save you a lot of time. It's especially useful if you fish large backwoods areas or rivers and lakes with few features. You can mark your secret spots so you can easily find your way back in the future. If you really want to tell others about your find—it's as easy as giving them the GPS coordinates. Then, there's one very important consideration—finding your way home. GPS allows you to navigate safely, even when you get caught in a heavy fog or other bad weather conditions. In an emergency situation, you can communicate precise positions to rescue workers.

PRIVATE LAND

#45 Check it out. First, determine whether it is really private or "accidentally" posted public land.

#46 Simply ask. You have nothing to lose by politely asking the landowner for permission to fish. You could offer to provide some kind of help in return. Offer to help stock the landowner's water. If it's a private fishing club—don't bother to ask. But many fishing clubs are simply a group of anglers who have made an arrangement with the landowner. Sometimes the return to the landowner is stream or lake improvements, stocking fish or help paying the property taxes. Maybe you could start a small club yourself and develop your own private secret spot.

ASK LOCAL EXPERTS

#47 Don't forget guide services local to the area you want to fish—but not all are into small water fishing. Also, most state fisheries departments have helpful and knowledgeable biologists and field staff. State and national park personnel can sometimes help. They may tell you if a remote stream or lake has ever been stocked. For safety reasons it's a good idea to let rangers know about your plans to access a remote area.

State fisheries departments often stock a lake or stream one year and not the next. If the lake didn't endure winterkill, the holdover trout may have grown to a nice size. Contact the agency to see if they stocked the water—most provide listings. Look for the ones you've never heard of. Then refer to your Professor Higbee's Guide and Map for the location. You may want to look at the streams shown on your map that are not listed by the agency—many of these waters were very likely stocked with fish at some point in the past. But, because they aren't currently listed it's possible they have not been fished in years.

EXPLORING FOR YOUR OWN "SECRET SPOT"

Maybe that big fish lies waiting for you where few anglers go. Be prepared to hit some dead-ends—there's water out there that simply has no fish. Part of the fun is in the exploring and getting into the outdoors. I hope you have success with this information and experience the thrill of finding your own secret spot.

Smaller water is much more vulnerable to being fished out. Please remember to CATCH AND RELEASE.

Larry Seaman,

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